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# Reading Recent Australian Women's Fiction*

In Australia the influence of the women's liberation movement, and the success of overseas women's publishers like Virago, have helped produce audiences which today are receptive to some kinds of women's writing. Australian publishers have become more willing to take commercial risks on books by women, now there is evidence that sufficient numbers of people, including women, will buy them. But whether these shifts in literary practices constitute 'women's favoured status' is another matter, particularly given the paucity of information available about book publishing ...

Probably in some areas of book reviewing there have also been shifts towards a more equitable gender balance although, again, I doubt whether these are consistent or substantial. A survey of reviewing in the *Courier-Mail* in the mid-1980s, commissioned by the University of Queensland Press, showed that certain categories of books (including poetry, and those by and/or about Australians, women and Blacks) were often less likely to be seen as sufficiently reputable for mention in the Saturday literary pages. That Kerryn Goldsworthy has seen fit to state that during her editorship of *Australian Book Review* she aimed for a gender balance, of reviewers as well as books reviewed, suggests that hers was not a usual practice. And of course, we don't all share allegiances: women don't necessarily write sympathetic reviews of other women simply because of their sex.

At this point, for feminists working from socialist perspectives, the Gerard Windsor debate[1] begins to seem oddly-constructed. Proceeding from a binary 'male/female' model leaves conservative gender definitions and divisions fixed in place, ossified and unmovable. Gender is more

* From 'Qualitative Methods? Reading Recent Australian Women's Fiction'. *Hecate* 12.2 (1987/8): 149–57.

correctly an important, but not the only, factor involved in literary production and the formation of literary opinion, as is shown even in the responses to Windsor's comments ...

Over the past twenty years the women's liberation movement, in questioning dominant assumptions of gender, has proposed a number of causes for the construction of gender differences and the sexual division of labour. Social, cultural, biological, and class-related theories have been mooted. Despite the emergence, largely in academic debate, of sometimes biologistic proposals of 'female specificity', deriving from some French feminist accounts of the female body, I would argue that the more politically relevant approaches to discussing gender come from those Black, migrant and working class perspectives which make the binary opposition 'women/men' seem inadequate. These perspectives suggest that some versions of feminism may even be oppressive, when they subsume differences among women to 'universalising' analyses ...

In the light of these complicated (to say the least) circumstances of literary production and consumption, how might socialists and feminists develop ways of reading some recent writing by Australian women? Qualitatively; quantitatively; as 'women's texts' or, perhaps, none of the above?

Quantitatively, there seems to be little real problem in some women being widely recognised as 'good', even 'excellent' writers. In 1987 women have won a number of prestigious prizes: Jessica Anderson the *Age* Book of the Year Award, Janine Burke and Lily Brett the fiction and poetry sections respectively of the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, and Helen Garner, the TV writing, and Glenda Adams, the fiction section of the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award (though as punishment for living overseas, Adams got glory but no money). Whether women's literary status is consistently equal probably still remains less certain but, even so, one novel by an Australian woman has been proclaimed this year as 'one of this century's major novels'.[2] The case of Christina Stead is useful for my discussion for, while feminists are among those who have assisted in her growing literary status, Stead placed herself at a distance from feminism, probably being noted more for her life-long socialism. Nor are her women characters always sympathetically read by feminists, leading to a tendency for a focus on only some Stead novels, in ways that Amanda Lohrey argues have 'corralled [Stead] in the domestic'.[3]

Yet Stead's socialist commitment might provide a way of reading *I'm Dying Laughing* that moves beyond the confines of a 'literary excellence' debate. Stead's editor, R. G. Geering, has suggested that the novel is about 'domination, exploitation, greed', but it could also be read as about people (particularly women) who embody the conflicts of historical contradictions.[4] The first notes for *I'm Dying Laughing* date from the 1940s, although it was not finished for many years, with Stead's publishers in 1966 requesting the inclusion of more political and social detail. Perhaps the intervening Cold War rendered 1930s and 1940s Communist activity in the United States culturally invisible.



There could be a clue here in the light of novels by a number of 1930s and 1940s Australian women writers, which also have only recently become available. Might aspects of *I'm Dying Laughing* be read usefully in conjunction with works from this earlier period? Certainly Stead's analysis of gender in this text is broadly similar to that of writers like Katharine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark or Jean Devanny. Their novels often have personal politics as the central but not the sole narrative focus, with gender articulated historically in relation to the conflicts of a specific context. History also becomes central so that, in *I'm Dying Laughing*, the 1930s, World War Two and the Cold War become almost a continuous historical event, being presented as not easily separable components of continuing right-wing dominance.

In comparison with these earlier writers, women in the 1970s and 1980s are more likely to present personal or domestic politics as the chief focus. There seems to be something of a recent Australian tradition of women writers exploring the politics of private life. Often this involves critiques of love and romance and, usually, there is a central female character (sometimes an artist or a writer) who 'achieves self-realisation' in a way that allows her to make crucial decisions about the future running of her life. This 'tradition' might include Dorothy Johnston's *Ruth*, where the main character not only leaves her husband and children but disappears from the pages of the book. This twist in the plot enables us to consider the psychological and material possibilities her absence produces for her children, along with other things. Lucinda in Janine Burke's *Second Sight* is helped by friends to learn from and move beyond a period of emotional depression, beginning once more (and in different forms) to write. Vinnie in Georgia Savage's *The Estuary* also learns to reconcile the demands of the emotions with those of everyday life. Like Ruth, Vinnie is a mature woman, pointing to the range of interest of this

recent women's tradition. From another perspective, Elizabeth Jolley in *The Well* explores the obsessive psychological results of one (mature) woman's attempt to construct a sanctuary in the midst of what is for her a restrictive social situation.

Some works examine what may be more familiar women's territory, the achievement of 'self-realisation' as part of gaining adulthood. Jill Golden's stories, *Jess*, show a young child growing up. Gradually details of the world around her and of herself being to make more sense. Angela in Marion Halligan's *Self Possession* is educated not just academically but in living, taking command of her future after learning the hard way, through an abortion. Halligan's and Savage's novels employ a picaresque style, their humour possibly suggesting that some aspects of women's experience are now acceptable in the dominant literary tradition. These narratives are less likely to be read as arguing their points with anger and emotion as sometimes occurred in readings of 1970s women's novels, like Garner's *Monkey Grip* and Elizabeth Riley's *All That False Instruction*.[5]

The works just discussed are considerably more interesting in their discussions of domestic politics than [Gerard] Windsor's label of 'Garner/Farmer territory — domestic pain' suggests. Unlike in Stead, history is not often here presented as structurally central, though it could be argued that, as an effect of an absence of engagement with it, psychological alienation can be read as operating ...

Critiques of women's position are offered in these books in ways that in some instances also extend the boundaries of a women's literary tradition. Often this involves explorations of form and, in relation to this, the novels by Burke, Johnston, Jolley and Grenville can be read as experimenting with language and structure to produce depictions of a sometimes 'split' modern consciousness. These books can then be read usefully in comparison with other experimental Australian women's writing, including works by Moya Costella, Anna Couani, Ania Walwicz, Jan McKemmish and Marion Campbell ...

Questions of form are of course correctly understood as intricately related to or, maybe, as indistinguishable from questions of subject matter, of what is written about, in all writing, including fiction — hence, perhaps, Stead's version of modernism in *I'm Dying Laughing* which allows her to include a broad scope of historical experience that is essential for the novel's social and psychological analyses. Many of the books discussed above can be read as adapting or, sometimes, as extending the boundaries



of a preoccupation with personal life in recent Australian women's fiction. There is, however, some new Australian writing which can be read as challenging, not just as extending, the existing 'women's writing' definitions. Significantly, these works also highlight aspects of women's experience which are not always comfortably contained in the dominant versions of mainstream, relatively socially-acceptable feminism; that is, perspectives of race and ethnicity, class, and lesbian sexuality.

Two of these are autobiographies: *My Place* by Sally Morgan and *Child of Vietnam* by Uyen Loewald.[6] Both are written from perspectives which locate their authors, because of their cultural heritage as well as their gender, at some distance from dominant Australian cultural assumptions. *Child of Vietnam*, written in English by an author who left Vietnam in 1965, living first in the United States and later in Australia, can be understood as proceeding from a double psychological impulse. The first is for the author to understand her own growing-up in the difficult and what, on occasions, seemed incomprehensible circumstances of Vietnam, all of which provide an extra dimension to the structure of a narrator moving towards a measure of personal and social control. The second is as an explanation of a Vietnamese past for English-speaking readers in another culture ... Links between gender definitions and the surrounding culture are inescapable in this book as, too, are those between history and individual psychology. *Child of Vietnam* thus can usefully be compared with other women's writing focusing on cultural difference, particularly Asian difference as in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. This book also shares an interest in elucidating the possibilities and confusions of different languages.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* deals not just with her need to explain to white Australians the story of Aboriginal oppression, but with her need to discover her own background for herself. Morgan was not aware until in her teens of her Aboriginality, and her book tells how she patiently and insistently pieced together the story of her family's suffering at the hands of white Australia, and of their courage in the face of it. To do this she employs a multiple narrative structure, so that the book is necessarily her family's story as much as it is her own ...

A comparative reading of a number of recent texts can demonstrate that the debate about recent Australian women's writing can be conducted along far more complicated and interesting lines than some of the present topical discussion allows. Talking about questions of literary value,

for instance, is more likely to be useful if the political and aesthetic concerns which lead to the construction of literary standards are also addressed in that debate. Talking about the number of women who are writing is interesting only if what they write, their differences as well as their similarities, and their varying relationships to literary institutions are also taken into account, particularly if some writers seem to be gaining a widespread literary acceptability. In this context, proposing theories of 'women's favoured status' will need far more evidence than has been provided thus far.

It is common to hear of a recent flowering or renaissance in Australian literature, of which women's writing forms an important part. But the publishing of Australian books, and the discussions of Australian culture in articles and book reviews are likely to be modified by the latest media takeovers, with far more Australian publishers, as well as the mass media, now in the control of multinationals ...

**Notes**

1. See Introduction (xxvii).
2. Don Anderson. 'Tragedy and Dinner Parties'. *Australian Book Review* (July 1987): 6–8.
3. Amanda Lohrey. 'The Dead Hand of Orthodoxy'. 21; also see Susan Sheridan. *Christina Stead*. Brighton: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1986.
4. R. G. Geering. '*I'm Dying Laughing*: Behind the Scenes'. *Southerly* 3 (1987): 309–17.
5. See my articles, 'Women and the Literary Pages: Some Recent Examples'. *Hecate* 11.1 (1985): 5–11; and 'Constructing the Woman Writer: The Reviewing Reception of Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*'. *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels* edited by Carole Ferrier. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985. 179–99.
6. See Judith Brett. 'Breaking the Silence'. *Australian Book Review* (August 1987): 9–11; Nene Gare and Patricia Crawford. 'Sally Morgan's *My Place* — Two Views'. *Westerly* 32.3 (1987): 79–84; Veronica Brady. 'Something That Was Shameful'. *Age Monthly Review* 7.6 (1987): 3–5.